

Angels in Helicopters

U.S. medical team treats nearly 1,000 in Costa Rica

By Stacy L. Comp and Robert B. Andrew

The isolated communities of Costa Rica's Punta Burica region, including some indigenous groups, received much-needed medical care from U.S. military and Costa Rican civilian doctors who arrived at the remote area in September via Blackhawk helicopters. Many patients and local elders said they never dreamed they would receive such medical treatment.

Village leader Kanaki Carrera called it "a dream come true."

In just three days the Medical Readiness Training Exercise team addressed two years of backlogged medical problems, including tooth decay, parasites, skin infections, tooth extractions, pre-natal care, diarrhea and respiratory infections. Inhabitants of the region abutting Panama along Costa Rica's southernmost Pacific coast are too poor and too far from doctors to receive regular medical care.

The MEDRETE team consisted of 36 members of the Honduran-based U.S. Joint Task Force-Bravo, 40 Costa Rican medical personnel and six translators from the U.S. Embassy in San Jose. U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica Peter Cianchette, the Costa Rican Minister of Public Security, three national legislators and several embassy officers also visited the treatment sites.

Embassy San Jose's Office of Defense Representative coordinated the MEDRETE mission, supported by the post's administrative, political, regional security and public affairs offices. The embassy also held a food collection, and several hundred pounds of food were donated to region's people. Many Costa Rican government ministries also worked behind the scenes to make the MEDRETE visit a success.

MEDRETE member Luis Jimenez, a dental assistant with a Costa Rican group, said, “It would have been very difficult for us to provide care to these areas without the (airlift that JTF-Bravo) provided.”

Due to the rough terrain and lack of roads, local residents needing emergency care face a three-hour trip by horseback to the nearest medical facilities, across the border in Panama where medical care is not guaranteed to Costa Ricans. Village leader Carrera said some die on the arduous journey. Routine health care languishes, until Costa Rican public health workers make their infrequent visits.

“We are very thankful for the support,” Carrera said of the doctors’ visit. “It is something very kind.”

Coast Guard Commander Mark Camacho, the embassy’s ODR chief, stressed the value of these joint projects. “Because there is no military in Costa Rica, it is important for people to see how we can provide humanitarian assistance and joint training with the police force in Costa Rica,” he said.

While Costa Rica is relatively more developed than the rest of Central America, it still has remote, mostly indigenous areas of high poverty, such as Punta Burica.

“The U.S. has prided itself for years by helping our friends,” said Ambassador Cianchette. “This is just another example of how we can assist where needed.”

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Please see pictures on the following pages.



